

Marines Assault and Retake

ALCATRAZ

Story by Dennis A. Cavagnaro • Photos by Bill Wasson



Fifty years ago on Thursday, May 2, 1946, less than a year after the Battle of Okinawa, Marines had "taken off their packs." One group was enjoying the peace of easy duty on Naval Station, Treasure Island in the middle of San Francisco Bay.

Little did they know that at 1345 on Alcatraz, another small San Francisco Bay island, hardened convicts Bernard Coy and Marvin Hubbard would assault guard William Miller and set off "The Alcatraz Revolt."

Before it was over, the federal penitentiary officials had to "call in the Marines" to make an amphibious land-

ing under fire, force a 30-hour siege and execute a final assault to secure the "escape-proof" prison. Yet, in the Bureau of Prison's official history of a riot, the Marines were barely mentioned.

Marine Warrant Officer Charles L. Buckner, who led the detachment of Marines in the assault, later stated in an interview, "I've been a Marine 12 years. I fought on Bougainville and Guam, but you can say for me that Alcatraz Island prison is the toughest defensive position I ever saw.

"Thirty-three of us Marines went on the Rock Thursday after Warden James A. Johnston called on Treasure Island

Above: This is Alcatraz today. From the distance "The Rock" looks much the same as it did in 1946. Note the resemblance to a ship.

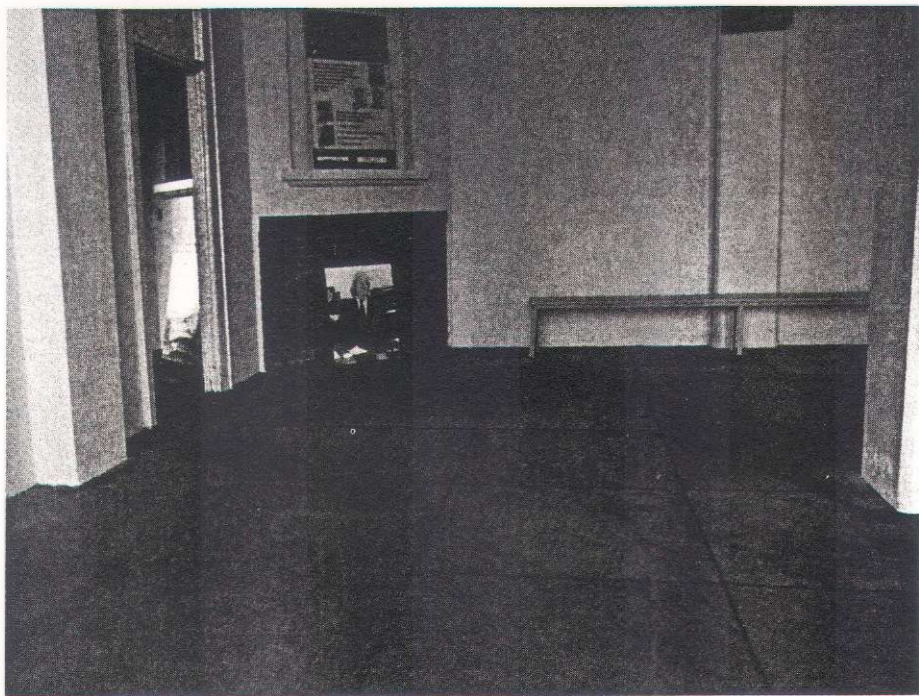
Right: The east wall of the cellblock

barracks for help. Some of us dressed in prison guard uniforms, and we opened up on the cons with antitank rifle grenades from the west slope of the island."

That evening, Bill Wasson, then a Marine technical sergeant and photographer, had finished cocktails and was seated for dinner at San Francisco's exclusive Bohemian Club. The bellman called out, "Paging Sergeant Lawson."



Below: Warden James A. Johnston's office was used as an infirmary for the wounded during the prison uprising.



As Bill looked at his half-eaten steak, he asked, "Could that be 'Wasson'?" Of course, it was.

"I drove madly through downtown San Francisco to 100 Harrison Street [Headquarters of the Marine Corps Department of the Pacific] and went to my office in the photo department, loaded a bunch of film into my camera bag and reported to the O.D. He directed me to report to the security office on Treasure Island for temporary duty with the Marines assaulting the Rock.

"Those were the days of two-way traffic on the Bay Bridge's top deck. When I got to Yerba Buena Island, I made an illegal left-hand turn across the three lanes of oncoming traffic and headed down the ramp to the T. I. main gate at high speed. I was noticed in my maroon 1941 Olds coupe and almost shot by the jeep-mounted guard tailing me.

"After explaining my unorthodox conduct, I was issued a .45-caliber pistol and duty belt and ushered into the Guard CO's office. Major Arsenault, the Department of the Pacific PIO [Public Information Officer], briefed me on the situation, and then we were taken to the docks where we boarded a landing craft for Alcatraz.

"It was cold and foggy. We slowly approached the dock from the east and came about to acknowledge the guard's challenge. After docking, heavily armed prison guards demanded surrender of my camera.

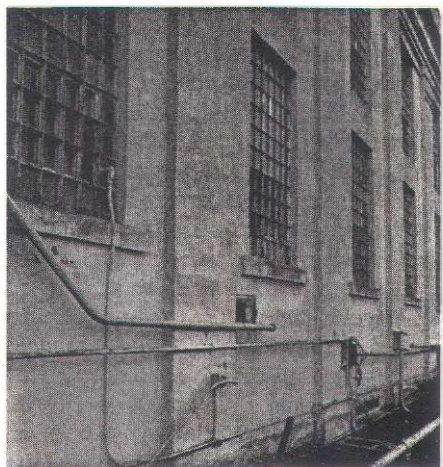
"Two guards escorted Major Arsenault and me up a path which turned to

hug the main cellblock wall. As we climbed the hill in darkness, the only light we could see was the faint glow of San Francisco's lights through the fog. We firmly pressed our right shoulders to the cellblock wall and slowly edged forward following the rising ground to the warden's office. Major Arsenault, Gunner Buckner and I were given an additional briefing on the Marine guard detachment's duties.

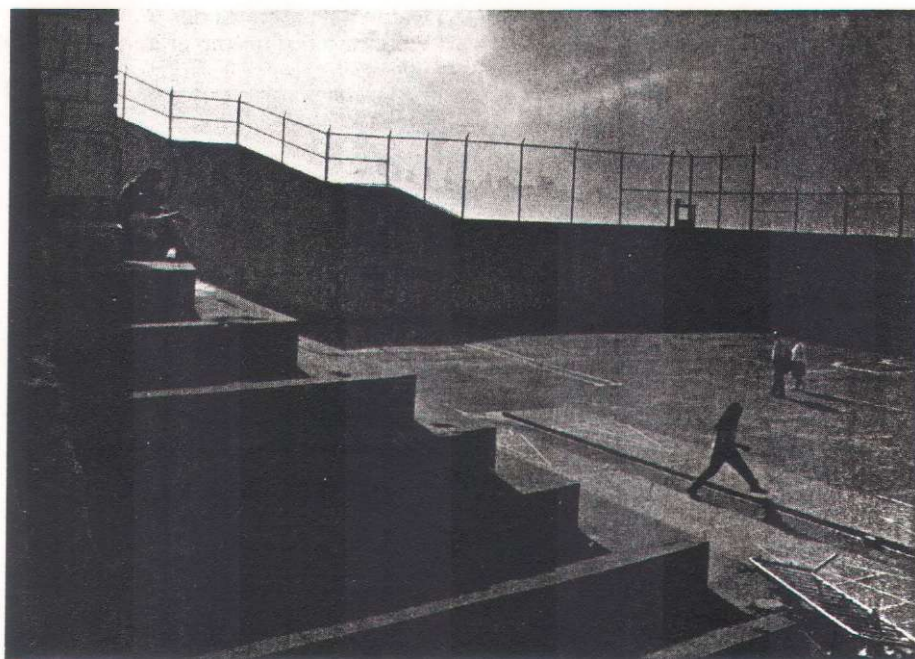
"The Marines were posted atop the perimeter wall of the large exercise yard to contain the activities of the prisoners stranded there when the prison break was discovered. They were shivering from the fog and cold wind, so the Marines were called on to throw them blankets.

"Back at the warden's office we stood helplessly by as we watched prison guard Corwin lying on the warden's office floor. He had been shot through the chest and had had his face beaten in with a pistol. He survived, but guard Miller, who appeared less seriously injured, later died in the hospital, bleeding to death from his gunshot wounds. Other guards were crawling on all fours to scout the cellblock to search for other wounded or trapped guards.

"Major Arsenault, Gunner Buckner and I were assigned a new task. The main cellblock entrance was a room with double steel doors at either end operated by guards in a control room on the outside of the passage room. The three of us were posted in front of the door to challenge anyone attempting to exit from the main cellblock.

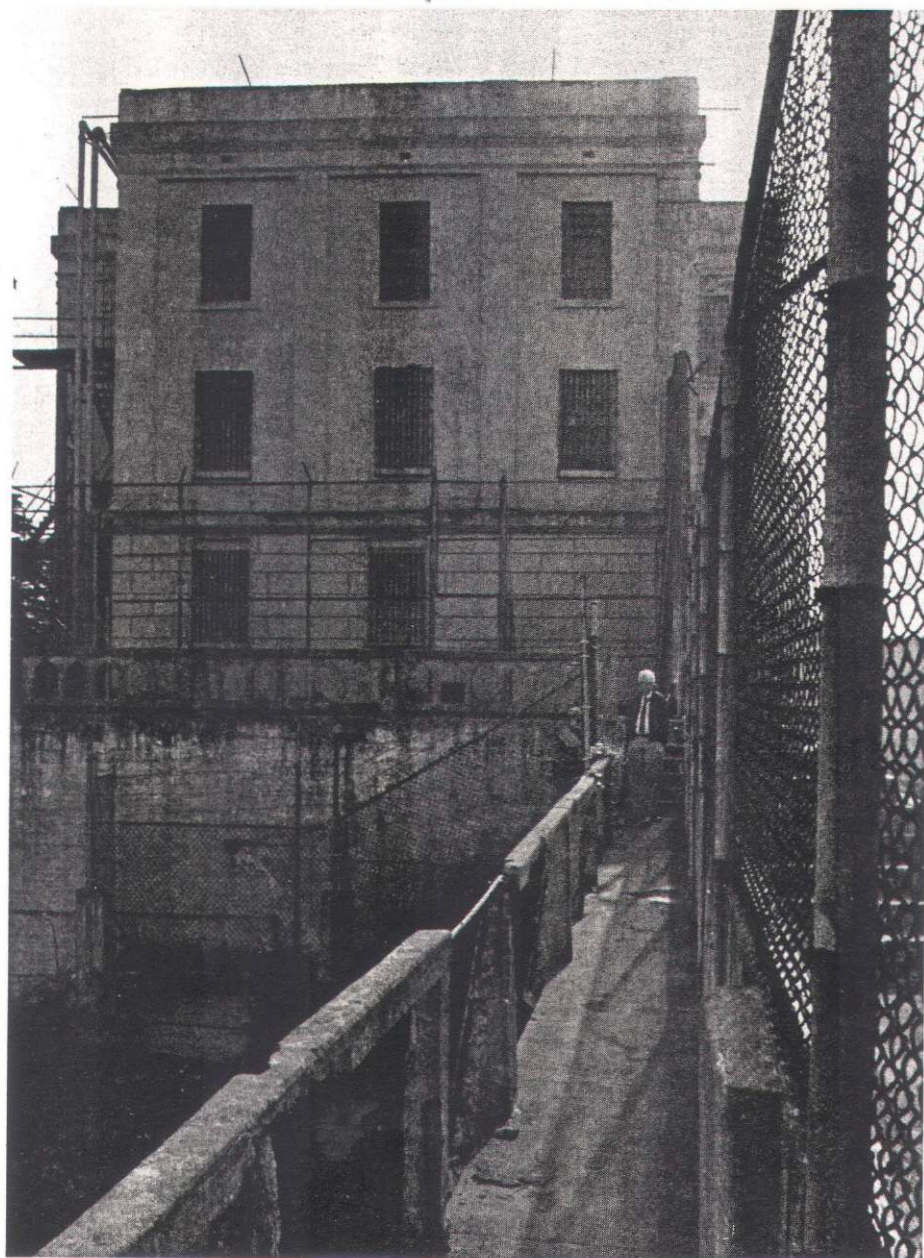


Below: Marines threw blankets from this guard walkway to prisoners stranded in the exercise yard during the failed "break."



Above: The exercise yard with stone bleachers in the left foreground

Left: Former guard Frank Heany strolled on the guard's walk with the north wall of the cellblock to his rear.



"The doors only opened twice while we were on duty. Luckily, guards were the only ones seeking exit.

"After a long night of uncertainty without resolution, we departed at first light as new guards arrived. I retrieved my camera and case at the dock, and we reembarked for Treasure Island.

"Warrant Officer Buckner stayed on the Rock to orchestrate the counter-escape measure for another day or two. It was well covered by the local press. I was a photographer again."

The *New York Times* reported the next morning, "Desperados, checked in break for liberty at Alcatraz Penitentiary in San Francisco Bay but still holding many prison officials as hostages, were fighting a gun battle tonight with guards and reinforcements as a detachment of Marines landed and Coast Guard boats and planes encircled and patrolled the island to cut off escape."

WO Buckner told what happened then. "We got a hole cut through the top of the cellblock late yesterday [Friday, May 3] and lowered grenades on strings to let 'em have it.

"Let me out," one guy yelled. But when the guards started to let 'em out, they got a blast of rifle fire from cell tiers.

"Yesterday morning, I went around on the slope of the hill over there in front of Block D—that's the bunch of cells that runs across the northwest face of the prison facing the Golden Gate. We found



Left: The Marines moved in the dark up this road from the dock to the cellblock.

Below: Bill Wasson, a technical sergeant photographer at the time, recently stood next to the sally port to the main cellblock. It was his assigned post during the first night of the attempted escape.

a little break in a hedge by the road, and we fired rifle grenades at the windows of the cells where we knew the men were holed up."

In the meantime, Joe Rosenthal, Pulitzer-prize winner for his Iwo Jima photo, who was working as a staff photographer for the *San Francisco Chronicle*, was in a hired launch with other photographers and reporters covering the story. According to Rosenthal, "The Coast Guard wouldn't let us get any closer to Alcatraz than 200 yards. When they weren't looking, we'd edge closer for better photos and then be chased back by the Coast Guard."

At midday WO Buckner wore down. "I quit at noon—simply because my shoulder and face were so sore and burned I wouldn't have shot off another of those things at Tojo himself.

"Those guys in the cellblock yelled plenty when we plopped the rifle grenades in. But they didn't come out. We already had bored some holes in the roof over Block C.

"There was a guard stationed at the south end of the block commanding that corridor and other guards up at the north end. I had to be careful not to get any grenades too close to those men.

"You'd have to go inside that block to see what a tough position it was. They could move all over the block on all three tiers. If a guard started up a ladder or along a passageway, those cons would lay back in a cell and pop at him when his head appeared.

"The guards had guts. I heard more than one plead with the warden to let him go in and shoot it out. But the warden didn't want anyone else hurt. He said there was plenty of time.

"I don't know anything about any deal between the prison authorities and the cons. But there was a break in the firing yesterday afternoon. The warden said to wait and see what they would do.

"About 5 o'clock one of the cons fired a rifle slug through the south door in Block C. I guess the cons wanted to make a peephole because they couldn't see anybody to shoot at.

"We went back to the roof again. That's when I lowered a few grenades down the vents on strings. That way they'd go off at the right distance and shatter the vents. I also fired several antitank grenades with a rifle pointed right down a hole. I wanted to shatter a kind of concrete culvert or conduit where we thought maybe the men were taking cover.

"We'd drop a few grenades at each end of the block—and give them a little time to run for this culvert. Then I'd fire the rifle grenades at 'em. If there's any cons in Block C today—they're dead cookies."

During the battle, other Marines guarded the non-rioting prisoners, including "Machine Gun" Kelly.

Of all Alcatraz escape attempts, this was the most serious by far. By the end of the bloody two-day affair, two guards and three prisoners were dead, and



another 17 guards and three prisoners were wounded. Later, two convicts were executed for their participation.

The federal penitentiary on Alcatraz was closed in 1963. Once home to Al "Scarface" Capone and Robert "The Birdman" Stroud, Alcatraz was reopened to the public in 1973 as part of the Golden Gate National Recreation Area. More than a million visitors enjoy ranger-led and self-guided tours. Ferry service is provided by the Red & White Fleet. For reservations, call (415) 546-2700.

